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ABSTRACT

The major components of playfulness in kindergarten children are physical, social, and cognitive spontaneity, manifest joy, and sense of humor. Children who are highly playful also show high scores in divergent and creative thinking. Piaget postulated that after the age of 7 or 8 this quality is replaced by assimilating the objective facts of the observed world. It is contended that playfulness becomes a personality trait in later developmental stages and may be observed in the adolescent level and beyond. Playfulness, the basis for creative thought, is evident when an individual is dealing with the familiar and the known and feels a sense of control and competence. Teachers should provide experiences for learning which will draw upon what the student knows. Encouraging the element of "fun in learning" by using the students' awareness of their personal "knowledge pool" opens the way to creative and divergent thinking. (JD)

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PIAGET: INSPIRATION -- MODIFICATION -- APPLICATION

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When I agreed to speak about Piaget and his influence on my own work, I knew I had undertaken a difficult task. When, afterwards, I was asked to compress my remarks into a narrow time slot, I was wondering how I could even attempt such a charge. After all, Piaget was one of the most fertile minds in his ideas and theories about the development of children. And my own work in play, in particular the conceptualization and measurement of playfulness in play and its relationship to divergent thinking, has spanned some 20 years. My solution to the dilemma was to focus on one aspect of my work which, I hope, will be of particular interest to this audience. It is an outgrowth of my thinking about playfulness in the classroom, and I call it "fun-in-learning." I shall structure my remarks in line with the title I have chosen, and will start with the inspiration that Jean Piaget provided for my own thinking.

In his treatment of play, in the now classic Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood, Piaget states

> Play begins when /this/ accommodation becomes of secondary importance because it is subordinated more or less completely by assimilation. The attempt at accommodation is then replaced by action for its own sake, the 'pleasure of being the cause'...
>
> (1962, p.153)

Accommodation and assimilation are very important concepts in Piaget's approach to gaining knowledge about the world around us.

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Since Piaget himself illustrates the meaning of his concepts more often by example than by definition, a good many interpretations exist in the literature. For our discussion today, I suggest the following reading:

Assimilation -- seeing and reacting to the world around us with our existing cognitive structures or schemata.

Accommodation-- allowing the objective facts of the situation in which the individual finds himself/herself alter our picture of the world around us.

Let me now repeat what Piaget considers the state of affairs when we play--assimilation takes over; you manipulate the world around you within the framework of what you already know, and doing so, there is a feeling tone of pleasure--"function pleasure" or, in its original format, Funktionslust, which accompanies the action. The type of assimilation which works in play is termed "ludic" assimilation by Piaget and, in Piaget's observation, becomes an active ingredient in creative imagination.

How these specific concepts influenced my own thinking in the development of what I labeled "playfulness in play" and its relationship to divergent thinking or creativity will be briefly presented under "Modification." Let me take you back now some 20 or more years. We are in an era of excitement about Sputnik and our own first exploits into space. Creativity and the creative processes have become a new domain of inquiry for psychologists and educators. It was at that time that I came across a description of the creative thought process formulated by Albert Einstein. He saw as one of the essential ingredients

the factor of "combinatorial play." Since my work and interest then was in early childhood, I wondered whether this quintessence of play could not be identified in young children when, after all, their predominant mode of behavior is play. With the help of nursery and kindergarten teachers, I conceptualized a quality of play and formulated behavior dimensions. The three major components of playfulness in kindergartners were: spontaneity--physical, social, and cognitive, manifest joy, and sense of humor. It described the youngster who hopes, skips, and jumps, moves easily in and out of groups, is imaginative in dramatic and constructive play, chuckles and also shows "glint-in-the-eye" humor. From this portrait you can see the operation of ludic assimilation with a generous dash of function pleasure. It is the fun element in a young child's activity. The kindergartners who were rated high on playfulness also showed higher scores on such divergent thinking tasks as suggesting improvements in toys and finding titles for stories that were read to them. Again we have an illustration of ludic assimilation being an active ingredient in creative imagination.

But my interest in playfulness took me beyond early childhood to later levels of development, especially the adolescent stage. As you will recall, I looked at the play of the young child to get a clue to an aspect of the thought processes which is an essential ingredient to creativity. And here I parted company with Piaget who postulates that after age 7 or 8, ludic assimilation is replaced by accommodation and once this process takes over, it leads to objective experiment-

ation. It is my contention that playfulness as a quality of play becomes a personality trait of the player at later developmental stages. In my investigations of playfulness at the adolescent level, while spontaneity, manifest joy, and sense of humor were still central characteristics of the behavior, two types of playfulness emerged. One, labeled academic playfulness, consisted of physical alertness, enthusiasm, intellectual curiosity. The other, called social-emotional playfulness, was made up of physical mobility, spontaneous joy, humor, group-orientation, friendliness, and play. When we interpret this in the framework of the focus of our discussion, namely, "fun-in-learning," it seems to suggest that, in the high-school classroom, one kid is learning and the other has the fun. The results may, of course, reflect the way the youngsters are perceived by the teachers. At the kindergarten level, teachers viewed playfulness as positive and constructive behavior. At the high-school level, about half the teachers saw playfulness as interfering with the learning process.

I strongly believe that the worthwhileness of studies and the findings from our investigations must prove themselves in their application to ongoing situations. I am, therefore, posing the question how playfulness as a quality of play and as a personality trait of the player can help us encourage "fun-in-learning." I shall now refer back to what we used as a definition of assimilation, namely, seeing and reacting to the world around us with our existing cognitive structures. I shall further cite my own postulation of when exactly playfulness has an impact on an individual's thought processes.

It is at the point at which we deal with the familiar and the known. It is at the point when we feel in control and experience a sense of competence. And it is at this very point that we, as teachers, can provide experiences for the learner which will draw upon what he or she knows. We need to give the learner time for this self-assessment and allow the student to come up with "I know this;" we need to allow him/her time also to re-arrange the knowns and, depending on his or her degree of playfulness, come up with novel or even unique re-combinations of the known. That is one way of encouraging "fun-in-learning," and it applies across age levels and across subject matter areas because at any given point in time, we all possess a "knowledge pool." Very often we are not given the chance in the classroom "to get to know what we know." As an epistomologist, Piaget would certainly approve of this type of application of theory and research findings. Moreover, it makes sense. And this is a vital criterion in translating research data into application in the field. To be given the time to play around with ideas once you are aware of what you know is, of course, to open the way to divergent thinking. And again this type of thinking can be encouraged at any age level and at almost any ability level. These days we are talking a good deal of mastery learning. Let us not forget that one of the hallmarks of mastery is the joy that accompanies achievement. Here again we need to incorporate the playful attitude into learning so that any increase in competence will increase the "fun-in-learning."

A few concluding remarks. My theme today was "Piaget: Inspiration--Modification--Application." I hope that I illustrated that in the realm of ideas, one person acts upon another, and we need to view ourselves as links in a chain. One part of Piaget's thinking has had a lasting effect on the formulation of my conceptualization of a behavior I labeled "playfulness in play and the player." Through my own writings I have stimulated investigations of other researchers using my concepts and instruments here in the United States and as far away as Japan. But ideas need to be applied, and the ultimate tribute to Piaget as to any other great thinker is in the way their ideas not only influence but also improve our own day-to-day activities.

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